

WHAT MAKES A GOOD DAD?



By Max Lucado

Introduction

Dear God,

Thanks for giving me a daddy. You knew just what I'd need! In case you need to make daddies for other kids, I thought you might like to know what I like best about the one you sent me:

A good dad ...

1. knows everything (like how to tie shoes and drive a car)
2. is really smart (he even knows where the wind goes after it blows through the trees)
3. has a forgiving heart (for when I mess up)
4. is loaded with patience, patience, patience (he probably won't need it, but just in case...)
5. has a comfy lap and a big laugh (you understand about that, don't you?)
6. tells me all about you and your son.

Your friend,

A Kid

P.S. I almost left out the best part! A good dad has real strong arms (to catch me when I fall. He says you're just like that, too.)

Chapter One

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A GOOD DAD MAKES GODLY DECISIONS

The Lord made an agreement with Jacob and gave the teachings to Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children. Then their children would know them, even their children not yet born. And they would tell their children. So they would all trust God and would not forget what he had done but would obey his commands. (Psalm 78:5-7)

Here's a Lucado hunch about parenting: fathers and mothers enter the child-rearing business at two different times. Mothers decide to be mothers long before dads do. A mother carries a baby for nine months, giving her an opportunity to grow content with her decision to parent the new family member.

Dad, however, goes about his daily routine, pretty much unaffected by what's going on inside the womb. Oh, he's supportive and excited, but compared to Mom, he's an observer. Until delivery time. Then Dad's world takes on new meaning. He looks into the face of the new life and is faced with the realization: "I'm the father of this child." You might call it a "delivery room discovery." At this point a good dad makes a big decision. **He has to decide to become a father.** And that decision sets up dominoes of decisions he will make for the rest of his life. It's a rational choice to alter his life, schedule, direction, and priorities in order to be a good dad to the tiny life in his arms.

Fathering a child is, for many, not difficult. But *being* a father is! It's the first and most important decision of fathers: to make a conscientious choice to be a father.

The decision to be a father is not just a delivery room decision, though. It is a **daily** decision. A century ago, dads were on-site parents, working the farm or running the family store. Children spent a great deal of their time alongside their parents, working together. But in our modern culture, employment distances most dads from their kids. Some dads leave home before the children are awake. Others arrive home long after the kids are home from school. Consequently, it is possible, even common, for a father to forget about fathering—to emotionally disconnect himself from his children. Throughout the day, every day, dads need to renew their "dad" decision. "Will I attend this convention?" "Is this meeting essential?" "Can I rearrange these appointments to get home earlier?" On the way home from work, dads have to decide to take off the work hat and put on the "dad" hat. It's a decision to manage his time, carefully reconciling work with the priority of family.

Being a good dad means making tough, sacrificial decisions. Decisions that tell our children what is important to us.

In his book, *Achieving Success Without Failing Your Family*, Paul Faulkner describes the decisions of an insurance executive. Speaking at a businessmen's convention, the man stressed the importance of being a father first. The man's daughter was in the audience.

... in the middle of his talk he had turned to her and asked, "Sweetheart, do you remember the time I won the million-dollar roundtable three years in a row?"

And she said, "No, Dad, I don't guess I do."

And then he asked, "Well, do you remember when we used to have those Dairy Queen dates?"

And she said, "Oh, yes!"

And then he turned to the audience to make the point that daughters don't remember when you sell a million dollars worth of insurance, but they do remember your special dates.¹

Not only must dads decide to be involved with their kids, available and interested in what interests them, but dads must decide what kind of role models they'll be. What an incredible privilege: the task of molding and shaping little children. Kids have a unique set of antennae—not only are they able to see much and hear more, they replay the behavior they see in their parents.

Paul Harvey tells a story that's a good example of this point:

Our "For What It's Worth Department" knows that when Grey Baker goes golfing in Jackson, Mississippi—he has taken his three-year-old grandson Trevor along as a companion...

The boy has been learning the game by watching.

Last week Grandpa Baker brought the lad a set of play golf clubs of his own.

This past weekend—during a family cookout in the backyard—the little lad who'd learned golf by observing Grandpa announced, "Watch me!"

And he said a no-no word and threw his golf club up into the pear tree.²

Of all the fathers in the Bible, one stands out for his decision to be a godly father. He consciously decided to be an adoptive father to his orphaned cousin, Esther. He could be called the father of courage, because he instilled this trait in his daughter. Do you remember the story?

¹ Paul Faulkner, *Achieving Success Without Failing Your Family*, 1994, West Monroe, LA, Howard Publishing Co., pp. 143-144.

² Paul Harvey, Jr., ed., *Paul Harvey's for What It's Worth*, 1991, New York: Bantam Books, p. 121.

The small book of Esther reveals the story of the beautiful Jewish girl whose clever courage saved her people. Mordecai raised his daughter to take a stand at the right time, to do the right thing.

Because of her beauty, Esther becomes Queen of Persia. Mordecai wisely advises her to conceal her heritage from King Xerxes. When Mordecai refuses to bow down to the king's officer, Haman, he places himself in jeopardy because of his convictions. He would bow before no one other than Jehovah. As a result, Haman conspires to destroy not only Mordecai, but all the Jews as well.

Mordecai urges Esther to appeal to the king on behalf of their people. "... you may have been chosen queen for such a time as this." (Esther 4:14)

Esther must have trusted Mordecai greatly, for she determines to stand before the king for her people. "And if I die, I die." (Esther 4:16)

Words of faith, words of courage. Words that a daughter could say because she was raised by a father who made the right decisions. Remember this: a crisis does not develop character; a crisis reveals character. The character Esther reveals must have been learned from observing her father's character.

As the plot twists and turns, Mordecai and the Jewish nation are saved and Haman is executed.

Usually, when we study the story of Esther, we see her strength and devotion to her people. But God used someone else in this story to accomplish his purpose. God used a faithful father—a father who impressed a young daughter to have courage in her convictions. At the right time, Esther did the right thing, because she had been raised by a godly father. A father who knew that the decisions he would make as his daughter grew would help her learn to make godly decisions later in life.

Chapter Two

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A GOOD DAD TREASURES HIS CHILDREN

*Fathers, do not make your children angry; but raise
them with the training and teaching of the Lord.
(Ephesians 6:4)*

"Jenna, wake up, it's time to go to school."

She will hear those words a thousand times in her life. But she heard them for the first time this morning.

I sat on the edge of her bed for awhile before I said them to her. To tell the truth, I didn't want to say them. I didn't want to wake her. A queer hesitancy hung over me as I sat in the early morning blackness. As I sat in the silence, I realized that my words would awaken her to a new world.

For four lightening-fast years she'd been ours, and ours alone. And now that was all going to change.

We put her to bed last night as "our girl" —exclusive property of Mommy and Daddy. Mommy and Daddy read to her, taught her, listened to her. But beginning today someone else would, too.

Until today, it was Mommy and Daddy who wiped away the tears and put on the Band-Aids. But beginning today, someone else would, too.

I didn't want to wake her.

Until today, her life was essentially us—Mom, Dad, and baby sister Andrea. Today that life would grow— new friends, a teacher. Her world was this house—her room, her toys, her swing set. Today her world would expand. She would enter the winding halls of education—painting, reading, calculating... becoming.

I didn't want to wake her. Not because of the school. It's a fine one. Not because I don't want her to learn. Heaven knows I want her to grow, to read, to mature. Not because she doesn't want to go. School has been all she can talk about for the last week!

No, I didn't want to wake her up because I didn't want to give her up.

But I woke her anyway. I interrupted her childhood with the inevitable proclamation, "Jenna, wake up ... it's time to go to school."

It took me forever to get dressed. Denalyn saw me moping around and heard me humming "Sunrise, Sunset" and said, "You'll never make it through her wedding." She's right.

We took her to school in two cars so that I could go directly to work. I asked Jenna to ride with me. I thought I should give her a bit of fatherly assurance. As it turned out, I was the one needing assurance.

For one dedicated to the craft of words, I found very few to share with her. I told her to enjoy herself. I told her to obey her teacher. I told her, "If you get lonely or afraid, tell your teacher to call me and I'll come and get you." "Okay," she smiled. Then she asked if she could listen to a tape with kids' music. "Okay," I said.

So while she sang songs, I swallowed lumps. I watched her as she sang. She looked big. Her little neck stretched as high as it could to look over the dash. Her eyes were hungry and bright. Her hands were folded in her lap. Her feet, wearing brand new turquoise and pink tennis shoes, barely extended over the seat.

Is this the little girl I carried?

Is this the little boy at play?

I don't remember growing older.

When did they?

When did she get to be a beauty?

When did he grow to be so tall?

Wasn't it yesterday when they were small?

Sunrise, sunset; sunrise, sunset;

Swiftly fly the days.¹

"Denalyn was right," I mumbled to myself, "I'll never make it through the wedding."

What is she thinking? I wondered. Does she know how tall this ladder of education is that she will begin climbing this morning?

¹ "Sunrise, Sunset" (Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick). ©1964 —Alley Music Corp. and Trio Music Co., Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

No, she didn't. But I did. How many chalkboards will those eyes see? How many books will those hands hold? How many teachers will those feet follow and—gulp—imitate?

Were it within my power, I would have, at that very instant, assembled all the hundreds of teachers, instructors, coaches, and tutors that she would have over the next eighteen years and announced, "This is no normal student. This is my child. Be careful with her!"

As I parked and turned off the engine, my big girl became small again. But it was a voice of a very little girl that broke the silence. "Daddy, I don't want to get out."

I looked at her. The eyes that had been bright were now fearful. The lips that had been singing were now trembling.

I fought a Herculean urge to grant her request. Everything within me wanted to say, "Okay let's forget it all and get out of here." For a brief, eternal moment I considered kidnapping my own daughters, grabbing my wife, and escaping these horrid paws of progress to live forever in the Himalayas.

But I knew better. I knew it was time. I knew it was right. And I knew she would be fine. But I never knew it would be so hard to say, "Honey, you'll be all right. Come on, I'll carry you."

And she was all right. One step into the classroom and the cat of curiosity pounced on her. And I walked away. I gave her up. Not much. And not as much as I will have to in the future. But I gave her up as much as I could today.

As I was walking back to my truck, a verse pounced on me. It was a passage I'd studied before. Today's events took it from black-and-white theology to technicolor reality.

"What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but *gave him up for us all*—how will he not also, along with him graciously give us all things?"²

Is that how you felt, God? Is what I felt this morning anything like what you felt when you gave up your son?

If so, it explains so much. It explains the proclamation of the angels to the shepherds outside Bethlehem. (A proud father was announcing the birth of a son.)

It explains the voice at Jesus baptism; "This is my son...." (You did what I wanted to do, but couldn't.)

It explains the transfiguration of Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop. (You sent them to encourage him.)

² Romans 8:31, 32 (emphasis, mine)

And it explains how your heart must have ached as you heard the cracking voice of your son, "Father, take this cup away."

I was releasing Jenna into a safe environment with a compassionate teacher who stood ready to wipe away any tears. You released Jesus into a hostile arena with a cruel soldier who turned the back of your son into raw meat.

I said good-bye to Jenna knowing she would make friends, laugh, and draw pictures. You said good-bye to Jesus knowing he would be spat upon, laughed at, and killed.

I gave up my child fully aware that were she to need me I would be at her side in a heartbeat. You said goodbye to your son fully aware that when he would need you the most, when his cry of despair would roar through the heavens, you would sit in silence. The angels, though positioned, would hear no command from you. Your son, though in anguish, would feel no comfort from your hands.

"He gave his best," Paul reasons, "why should we doubt his love?"

Before the day was over, I sat in silence a second time. This time, not beside my daughter, but before my Father. This time not sad over what I had to give, but grateful for what I'd already received—living proof that God does care.

Chapter Three

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A GOOD DAD IS "THERE" FOR HIS CHILDREN

*When I come home from work and see those little noses pressed
against the windowpane, then I know I'm a success.*
- Paul Faulkner -

Today is Father's Day. A day of cologne. A day of hugs, new neckties, long-distance telephone calls, and Hallmark cards.

Today is my first Father's Day without a father. For thirty-one years I had one. I had one of the best. But now he's gone. He's buried under an oak tree in a west Texas cemetery. Even though he's gone, his presence is very near—especially today.

It seems strange that he isn't here. I guess that's because he was never gone. He was always close by. Always available. Always present. His words were nothing novel. His achievements, though admirable, were nothing extraordinary.

But his presence was.

Like a warm fireplace in a large house, he was a source of comfort. Like a sturdy porch swing or a big-branched elm in the backyard, he could always be found ... and leaned upon.

During the turbulent years of my adolescence, Dad was one part of my life that was predictable. Girlfriends came and girlfriends went, but Dad was there.

Football season turned into baseball season and turned into football season again and Dad was always there. Summer vacation, Homecoming dates, algebra, first car, driveway basketball—they all had one thing in common: his presence.

And because he was there life went smoothly. The car always ran, the bills got paid, and the lawn stayed mowed. Because he was there the laughter was fresh and the future was secure. Because he was there my growing up was what God intended growing up to be: a storybook scamper through the magic and mystery of the world.

Because he was there we kids never worried about things like income tax, savings accounts, monthly bills or mortgages. Those were the things on Daddy's desk.

We have lots of family pictures without him. Not because he wasn't there, but because he was always behind the camera.

He made the decisions, broke up the fights, chuckled at Archie Bunker, read the paper every evening, and fixed breakfast on Sundays. He didn't do anything unusual. He only did what dads are supposed to do—be there.

He taught me how to shave and how to pray. He helped me memorize verses for Sunday school and taught me that wrong should be punished and that rightness has its own reward. He modeled the importance of getting up early and of staying out of debt. His life expressed the elusive balance between ambition and self-acceptance.

He comes to mind often. When I smell "Old Spice" after-shave, I think of him. When I see a bass boat I see his face. And occasionally, not too often, but occasionally when I hear a good joke (the kind Red Skelton would tell), I hear him chuckle. He had a copyright chuckle that always came with a wide grin and arched eyebrows.

Daddy never said a word to me about sex nor told me his life story. But I knew that if I ever wanted to know, he would tell me. All I had to do was ask. And I knew if I ever needed him, he'd be there.

Like a warm fireplace.

Maybe that's why this Father's Day is a bit chilly. The fire has gone out. The winds of age swallowed the last splendid flame, leaving only golden embers. But there is a strange thing about those embers, stir them a bit and a flame will dance. It will dance only briefly, but it will dance. And it will knock just enough chill out of the air to remind me that he is still in a special way, very present.

STUDY GUIDE

CHAPTER ONE:

A GOOD DAD MAKES GODLY DECISIONS

1. *Consequently, it is possible, even common, for a father to forget about fathering—to emotionally disconnect himself from his children. Throughout the day, everyday dads need to renew their "dad" decision.*
 - What is a "dad" decision?
 - What kind of decisions have you had to make as a parent?
 - What are some creative solutions to the time demands each dad faces?
2. *Kids have a unique set of antennae—not only are they able to see much and hear more, they replay the behavior they see in their parents.*
 - Do you agree with Max's statement?
 - Have your kids ever replayed something they've observed in you? How did it make you feel?
 - What is the most important attribute you hope to model for your children?

CHAPTER TWO:

A GOOD DAD TREASURES HIS CHILDREN

1. *One step into the classroom and the cat of curiosity pounced on Jenna. And I walked away I gave my daughter up. Not much. And not as much as I will have to in the future. But I gave her up as much as I could today.*
 - In what other ways will Jenna (or your boy or girl) have to be given up in the future?
 - Does it help to know that all this "giving up" doesn't have to be done at once? Why?
2. *I gave up my child fully aware that were she to need me I would be at her side in a heartbeat. You, God, said good-bye to your son fully aware that when he would need you the most, when his cry of despair would roar through the heavens, you would sit in silence. The angels, though positioned, would hear no command from you. Your son, though in anguish, would feel no comfort from your hands.*
 - Why did God give up his son so completely?
 - Imagine, if you can, what it might have been like in heaven's throne room while Christ suffered on the cross. What is the mood of the angels surrounding God—somber? Sad?

Happy? Angry? Confused?

3. *Before the day was over I sat in silence a second time. This time, not beside my daughter but before my Father. This time not sad over what I had to give, but grateful for what I'd already received.*

— Living proof that God does care.

- What is the “living proof” to which this passage refers?
- How do you respond to this “Living proof”?

CHAPTER THREE:

A GOOD DAD IS "THERE" FOR HIS CHILDREN

1. *It seems strange that he isn't here. I guess that's because he was never gone. He was always close by. Always available.*

- What images come to mind when you think of your dad? What words would you use to describe him as a father?
- What God-given role are fathers to play in the lives of their children?
- What do these passages reveal?
Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Psalm 78:1-8; Proverbs 3:11-12; Proverbs 13:24, 22:6; Ephesians 6:4, 1 Timothy 3:1-5; 1 Timothy 5:8?
- In order to fulfill those responsibilities, what three factors would be most critical?
- What positive influences did your dad have on your life? If he is still alive, how could you express your appreciation to him for those things? If he isn't, to whom could you pass on those blessings?

2. *He is still ... in a special way very present.*

- If you have lost a parent or some other close family member, in what way is that person still very present with you?
- What does your family do to keep the loved one's memory alive? What makes those memories joyous rather than sad?
- Why do you suppose God describes himself as our father? What fatherly characteristics do you see in these passages: Isaiah 64:8; Matthew 7:11; Matthew 10:29-31; 2 Thessalonians 2:1 & 17?
- How does your faith affect your acceptance of the death of a loved one?

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